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Migrant girls in Shenzhen: gender, education and the urbanisation of aspiration

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of rural-urban migration on primary-school-aged migrant girls in China, providing important data on this unexplored group as well as drawing several larger conclusions about the evolving relationship between migration and women's autonomy. Much recent literature has focused on Chinese young unmarried women migrants. However, there has been no attempt to distinguish migration's effects on children by gender, and little research on the "new generation" of married women migrants. This paper focuses on two aspects of migrant girls' wellbeing, education and migration satisfaction, comparing girls' assessments with those of their parents, particularly mothers. It analyses differences between girls' and parents' views, arguing that specific parental concerns about daughters shape girls' futures in a way not applied to migrant boys. A further, broader, implication of this analysis is that certain benefits of migration, previously thought to apply exclusively to single women, extend also to married women, influencing mothers when forming goals for their daughters' futures.

Key words: migrant children, gender, migrant girls, education, wellbeing, China

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In the last three decades, China has seen the world's largest urban-rural migration. In 2012 it was estimated that there were over 260 million rural migrants in China's cities, and that over half of China's population now lives in urban areas, compared with just a fifth in the 1980s[1]. Most rural migrants do not possess an urban household registration (*hukou* 户口), and are thus excluded from full access to many state goods and services in their urban area of residence. This is as true of the so-called "new generation" of migrant workers, born since the 1980s, as it was of the previous generation. What is different is that the new generation contains a much increased proportion of women migrants, including many married women who migrate with their husbands, and a large number of migrant children who accompany parents to the city.[2] According to a 2011 survey by the All-China Women's Federation, over half of new-generation migrant workers are women.[3] For rural families, sole migration of the husband to urban areas for work is increasingly giving way to couple migration and household migration.[4] The same survey estimates that there are now 35.8 million migrant children in China's cities, up from 25.5 million in 2005.[5] Around 20 million of these are thought to be between 6 and 14 years old and entitled to receive free compulsory education.[6]

Despite the shift in migration patterns, here has been surprisingly little work on the impact of migrating on married women in China, especially compared with the large body of literature on unmarried women migrants (usually aged approximately 16-25). Empirical studies of this latter group suggest strongly that, despite challenges and discrimination in urban China, migration promotes women's autonomy. Separation from older family members and the influence of urban culture create different expectations of women's familial and social roles.[7] Young women feel more confident and self-aware as a result of migration.[8] Many negotiate greater autonomy within their families, marry later than non-migrants and acquire savings and other personal property which increase their social status.[9] In fact, some young women migrate

[1] China Daily, 2013
[2] Fan and Chen, 2013
[3] ACWF, 2013
[4] Fan and Chen, 2013
[5] ACWF, 2013
[6] Chen and Feng, 2013
[7] Davin 2005: 34
[8] Zhang, 1997: 5–20
[9] Zhang, 1997: 5–20; Davin, 1997:13

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specifically in order to gain independence and to try to avoid marriage into agricultural households with strongly patriarchal attitudes.[10]

By comparison, the little existing work on new-generation married women migrants suggests a much less positive outcome. Unlike single women, married women are not able to renegotiate familial gender relations as a result of migration. Instead, they face severe disadvantage in the urban labour force and are subject to continued restrictive gender roles within the household.[11] However, whether this is changing as a result of continued increases in household migration during the late 2000s is unknown. Similarly, despite an increasing interest in the impact of migration on children, there has been very little research specifically on migrant girls. Whether girls who migrate with their families benefit in the same way as young unmarried women migrating alone, or whether possible negative consequences, such as those which are claimed to affect married women migrating with households, outweigh potential gains, is unclear. Despite increases in the numbers of rural migrant children in China's cities, research on their experiences remains both limited and "gender-blind".

This article primarily examines the impact of rural-urban migration on migrant girls, but also provides important insights into the relationship between migration and gender from the perspectives of migrant mothers, suggesting that the picture for these married women may not be as bleak as previously thought. It is based on analysis of interviews I conducted with migrant parents and children in Shenzhen city in 2008-2009. The next section outlines my research methods. The third section examines the impact of migration on girls' education, and suggests how this may differ from the effects on boy's schooling. The fourth part focuses on girls' perceptions of their wellbeing after migration, comparing this with parents' ideas about daughters' wellbeing, and identifies two perceived benefits of urban life for girls beyond formal schooling, the first of which relates to concepts of daughters' "quality". The second benefit, which relates to "urban skills", is analysed further in the fifth section, which examines mothers' perceptions of the advantages of urban life for young girls, and suggests that married women benefit from migration in several important ways. Mothers are keen to pass these benefits on to their daughters and have strongly urban aspirations for girls' futures. However, my conclusion suggests a more complex picture: although parents view the city as

[10] Jacka, 2006:118-127; 136-38
[11] Jacka 2006; Fan, 2003

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providing great benefits to daughters, the problems migrant girls face in receiving a decent education in urban China may make it difficult for them ultimately to realise their parents' ambitions.

Research Methods

Shenzhen has the largest number of rural-urban migrants of any Chinese city.[12] Since becoming China's first Special Economic Zone in 1980, it has become a major manufacturing centre of southern China, with a population of approximately 14 million – of whom only around 2 million have a Shenzhen *hukou*. Most rural migrants work in factories, particularly younger, new-generation migrants, although many also engage in informal sector small businesses such as market vending, including many of those who have migrated as a household. The number of migrant children in Shenzhen is unknown, but is at least 543,000 according to local government figures.[13]

Interviews with 92 migrant parents (63 mothers and 29 fathers) and 66 children (41 girls and 25 boys) were conducted within the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen from May 2008 to January 2009. Index children of parents interviewed and the separate (mostly unrelated) group of children interviewed were all aged 6-12 years, both at the time of migration and of interview, and had migrated not more than five years earlier. Interviews focused on education before and after migration, and on children's and parent's preferences for city or village as the best place for the child to live.

Most informants were found through door-to-door interviewing in migrant communities, but I also visited factories and other workplaces, and occasionally migrants introduced me to other informants. Parents came from 12 Chinese provinces and were drawn from eight Shenzhen fieldwork sites, so although the sample is not random I anticipate that the data is broadly representative for the purposes of comparing children's education and wellbeing by gender. My sample of children is less representative, especially of school experiences, since most children were identified from within the four migrant schools where I taught English language.

[12] Guangzhou ribao, 2010
[13] Shenzhen News, 2008

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Because of difficulties in gaining "informed consent" among such young children, I asked if children were happy to talk and explained that they could stop at any point or not answer any question. I was alert for non-verbal signs that the child did not want to continue, and did not pursue any purposefully evasive answers, but I found most children were keen to talk. In fact, it was difficult to turn away many children who wanted to participate but did not fit my criteria, so I asked a few token questions of many "unsuitable" children. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The names of informants used here are pseudonyms, since much of the information was sensitive or potentially compromising.

My interview data faces the limitation that informants' memories may not have been entirely accurate. This is a particular problem for pre-migration details, since interviewees, including children, had to recall details from up to five years previously. A larger issue is the difficulty of generalising from these case studies. While the material illuminates some of the long- and short-term impacts of migration to Shenzhen, whether it can provide larger generalisations about China is much less clear. Furthermore, the small sample of migrant families means that many conclusions even about Shenzhen can be only tentative.

Migration, schooling and the gender difference

Much literature, in both English and Chinese, has examined the educational problems of migrant children. Until 1993 migrants were barred from enrolling in urban state schools and, even after they were officially allowed entry, high legal and extra-legal fees prevented most from receiving a state education.[14] Since the nationwide abolition of all tuition fees in 2008, migrant children, like all children, are entitled to receive nine years of compulsory education free of charge. However, many city governments lack the incentives and financial resources to accommodate migrant children. A significant proportion therefore continues to be excluded from the state education system and enrolled in private, usually unlicensed, migrant schools.

Whereas certain other large Chinese cities, notably Shanghai, have undertaken campaigns to incorporate migrant children into state schools and to license official migrant schools, these have been lacking in Shenzhen. Although official statistics claimed that around 60% of

[14] See Goodburn 2009 for full details.

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migrant children in Shenzhen attended state schools in 2002, this figure included only migrant households officially registered with a temporary residence certificate, and is therefore likely to exclude most migrant children.[15] In fact, only migrant children formally registered with the local Education Department are eligible to enter Shenzhen state schools.[16] The conditions for registration in 2008-2009 included the provision of six official documents, known as the *wu jia yi* 五加一: five certificates and one proof. These were: *hukou* and temporary residence certificate; family planning certificate; school transfer letter; birth certificate; social insurance certificates of both parents; and property deed or officially-stamped rental contract. Very few migrant parents had all of these documents, so the majority of migrant children were unable to attend state schools.

Enrolment

Few children were not enrolled in school at all. Only four of 92 parents I interviewed reported that their child did not attend either state or migrant school, of which three were girls described as "too young", though aged 8-9 at the time of interview.[17] As my interviews focused only on children aged over 6 years, I cannot report accurately when younger migrant children began school in Shenzhen, but many younger sisters of index children were not enrolled in school despite being over 6. Delayed enrolment in school had already been more common for girls than boys before migration, with 65% of boys (30) having started school aged 6 or less, compared with 45% of girls (20), and migration seemed to have exacerbated this. Delayed enrolment may be related to the high costs of schooling in the city. While state schools are free from tuition and textbook fees from 2008 for those able to enrol, the private schools attended by most migrant children charged a mean monthly fee of RMB295 – a significant burden to most migrant parents.[18]

The case of a 10-year-old girl from rural northern Guangdong was typical. Ceoncau migrated to Shenzhen aged five, but did not attend school until the age of nine. She had three elder siblings and her family could not afford to educate her until her eldest sister finished school. Ceoncau was now struggling academically and socially in the second year of a local migrant

[15] Liang et al, 2008: 32
[16] Shenzhen Government, 2008
[17] By contrast, the out-of-school boy was engaged in full time labour in his parents' restaurant.
[18] Average combined earnings in two-parent families was RMB4,080, with some earning as little as RMB1,800 per month.

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school, among classmates two to three years younger. Many parents had similar stories, and although the costs of schooling could delay enrolment of younger boys, it was more common for girls. In some cases, even girls with enrolled younger brothers were out-of-school. One Guangdong father of two sons (aged 7 and 11) and a daughter (8), commented:

> "School fees in Shenzhen are extremely expensive. If we had a lot of money, of course we would send all our children to school now. But our sons go to school, and that is what is most important. The little girl will go to school a bit later – when we have earned more money!"

Type of school

Migration not only affected age of enrolment, but type of school attended. Before migration, almost all parents said that their child had attended state school.[19] After migration, however, 78% (72) attended unofficial private school, with only 17% (16) in state school. A smaller proportion of girls (14% [6]) attended state school than boys (22% [10]). This was not statistically significant (unsurprising given the small number of children attending state school), but is nonetheless interesting, since parental interviews suggested several important reasons girls were less likely to be enrolled in state schools.

The first was that male births were more often officially registered, so that more boys were able to provide the essential birth certificate and *hukou* in order to enter state school. Since rural family planning quotas allow couples a second child if their first is a girl, and since registration of out-of-plan births involves a large fine, many higher order female births were not officially registered. Furthermore, I found that even some elder and second daughters were unregistered, so that the family could "try again" for at least one son. Moreover, even where boys were born out-of-plan, they were more frequently registered than girls, since many parents of younger sons thought the fine worth paying to include boys on the family *hukou*. The bureaucratic restrictions on state school entry therefore had a disproportionate effect on girls.

[19] Even the few children educated "privately" before migration had in some cases attended the local state school, but as a private pupil. This was common in some areas for children born out of plan.

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Another reason for lower enrolment of migrant girls in state schools was that some parents saw sons' education as more important, making more effort to acquire documents, undertake admissions procedures, purchase equipment and pay for transport to send sons to state schools, which were often far from migrant communities. During home visits with students from migrant schools, some parents focused the discussion exclusively on their son's education, even if I taught their daughter and not their son. However, as Hannum has noted for rural China, the emphasis on boys' schooling over girls' was less pronounced in single-child families, perhaps because of more resources available to invest in the child's schooling, or because these parents would be dependent on their child in old age, regardless of sex.[20]

The fact that migrant children, and especially girls, attend migrant schools rather than state schools is relevant to assessing the impact of migration, because of the large difference in education quality. Research in other Chinese cities has demonstrated the inferiority of migrant schools compared with state schools, and Shenzhen is no exception.[21] Migrant parents in Shenzhen were well aware of the disparity in educational quality, and even many children knew that local state schools were much better equipped. Common complaints were poorly trained teachers, poor facilities, overcrowding and bad discipline. Furthermore, not only were migrant schools perceived as worse than Shenzhen state schools, but were seen as worse even than the rural state schools children had previously attended. Only 24% of parents (17) whose children attended private school thought the city school was better than in the home village, and even many parents who described the village school as bad thought it preferable to the migrant school.

Children's answers were similar. Only 10% (6) of those attending a migrant school thought that their teachers were good. Several spoke of problems of discipline and violence, and I witnessed many violent incidents in the schools. One seven-year-old girl told me that she cried everyday walking to school, because older children would hit her and steal her belongings. Another girl reported that some children were always bullied, and that even the teacher was afraid to speak to them, since older boys would then bully the teacher too. No child said he/she had been afraid in the village school.

[20] Hannum, 2005
[21] Kwong, 2004; Wang, 2006; Goodburn, 2009; Chen and Feng, 2013.

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The perceived superiority of rural schooling was such that some parents planned to send children, particularly boys, back to the village to be educated. 28% of boys (13) and 9% of girls (4) would be sent back within two years. Most of these were children were aged 10-12 who would begin junior-middle school in the countryside. Not only quality but also length of schooling was a problem for migrant children, since although migrant junior-middle schools were available in Shenzhen, few migrant senior-middle schools existed. Parents who wanted their child to stay at school after the compulsory education period would usually send the child back to the village. Since few parents themselves planned to return, children would live with grandparents. Given the poor quality of migrant schools and the lack of higher-level schooling, it may seem surprising that more parents did not plan to send their child home to be educated. I will analyse the reasons for this, and the gender difference, in the following section.

Overall, the effect of migration on girls' school attendance is small, though it may delay enrolment for some, causing further problems. The effect on the quality of schooling received is much more serious. Although both sexes struggle to enter higher-quality state schools after migration, girls face more obstacles than boys, particularly if they come from large families. Instead they overwhelmingly attend private migrant schools, where the education is worse (and is recognised by both parents and children as worse) not only than state schools in the city but even than those in home villages. It seems plausible, then, that while the education of both boys and girls suffers after migration, girls do worse educationally from migrating than boys.

Migration, girls' wellbeing and "outside-school education"

Given the greater obstacles girls face in gaining access to decent quality state schools, it is probably not surprising that fewer migrant girls than boys expressed satisfaction with life in the city. What is surprising is that a statistically-significantly greater proportion of parents of girls said that the city was the better place for their child to live, compared with parents of boys. This section discusses boys' and girls' preferences for city or village, examines how and why children's and parents' views of girls' wellbeing differ, and analyses the reasons why parents, particularly mothers, want their daughters to remain in Shenzhen despite the negative educational consequences. In analysing these complex and apparently contradictory findings, I show that close study of the attitudes of migrant girls and their parents leads to

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novel conclusions about the impact of migration on married women and the broader relationship between migration, gender and urban versus rural life in contemporary China.

Neither boys nor girls preferred the village overall, but a much smaller proportion of girls than boys said that they preferred to live in the city (Table 1). Satisfaction with city life did not increase with time spent there – in fact, girls' preference for the village was more common among those who had been in Shenzhen longer, whereas for boys, time spent in Shenzhen made no difference. Questions about where the child was happier produced similar answers, with 84% of boys (21) but only 59% (24) of girls happier in the city. By contrast, parents whose index child was a girl showed a statistically significantly stronger view that Shenzhen was the better place for their child at present.[22] This opinion was strongest of all in mothers of girls.

Table 1: Which place is better for children to live now? Parent and child answers

	City % (n)	**Village % (n)**	**Don't know % (n)**
Girls	63 (26)	29 (12)	7 (3)
Boys	84 (21)	16 (4)	-
Parents of girl	89 (39)	11 (5)	-
Parents of boy	65 (30)	35 (16)	-

Source: interview data

Why do parents' and children's views diverge? And how can parents' views that Shenzhen is better than the village for girls be reconciled with the damning accounts many gave of the quality of their daughters' education? I argue that it is not simply that parents see education as unimportant for girls, and the negative impact of migration on their schooling is therefore thought less significant. Instead, I suggest that parents have particular concerns about daughters' futures, and mothers' perceptions of the benefits they themselves have received as a result of migration influence them in valuing other aspects of urban life for girls above and

[22] Fisher's exact test showed a statistically significant difference in which place parents thought better by child's sex (P value <0.01)

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beyond formal education. This in turn leads us to a broader understanding of migrant perceptions of the role of women and girls in rural and urban China.

While some parents, especially in large families, expressed more interest in sons' education, none said that educating daughters was pointless, and even those whose daughters were unenrolled acknowledged the importance of girls' schooling. Many parents were very concerned about schooling quality. Even those whose working hours precluded attending school meetings, or whose lack of education prevented them from assisting with schoolwork, seemed concerned with their child's school performance. Many punished their child if he/she did not study diligently, and most made substantial sacrifices to afford school fees. It therefore seems odd that parents overwhelmingly viewed Shenzhen as a better place than the village for daughters to live, despite the worse schools most children (particularly girls) attended.

The activities (*huodong* 活动) and especially lifestyle (*shenghuo* 生活) girls could experience in the city were felt by most parents to be far better than those for girls in the village. In particular, seeing tall buildings, cars and luxury shopping malls were mentioned by many as examples of the city "lifestyle", as well as amenities more commonly used by migrant families such as supermarkets, buses, street lights and paved roads. While parents also discussed sons' urban activities, they seemed far more important for daughters, whereas other advantages of the city for sons, such as that the family had more disposable income, the accommodation was superior or the natural environment was better, were not mentioned at all for girls. Girls themselves also emphasised the activities and lifestyle of Shenzhen compared with the village, describing Shenzhen as " much more fun" (*haowan duo le* 好玩多了) "modern" (*xiandai* 现代) and "developed" (*fada* 发达), and again referring to cars, malls and tall buildings, even though none had entered a mall or skyscraper and most had not been in a car. The answer of one 10-year-old from Jiangxi is representative:

> "Here are many things to do and see. There are big shops and cars…there are many new places to visit. It is fun. In the village there are only fields."

However, unlike the parents, whose views of the city for daughters were, other than in education, overwhelmingly positive, many girls also spoke of problems experienced in the city. As other studies have indicated, children of both sexes experienced loneliness and

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discrimination after migration.[23] Some reported being hit, or having belongings stolen, by less-recently-migrated children who bullied newcomers. Many missed the companionship in the village. An 11-year-old girl from Jiangxi explained:

> "I am lonely. My parents work hard all day and don't have time to take care of me. They come home when I am already asleep… I can eat more food here but I am often by myself. I miss my grandmother in my home village. I have few friends in school here. My friends are all in the village."

Though parents were mostly aware that their child experienced loneliness and discrimination in Shenzhen, many perceived this as part of the more general problem of the low quality of migrant schools, and parents of daughters in particular emphasised that the positive aspects of city life outweighed these "educational" disadvantages. When I asked what children gained from the new activities and lifestyle, parents repeatedly mentioned skills (*jineng* 技能 or *nengli* 能力), knowledge (*zhishi* 知识) and "self-development" (*ziwo fazhan* 自我发展). This last was particularly targeted at girls: only one parent of a boy mentioned self-development, compared with 16 parents of girls. Examples of skills included the ability to take a Shenzhen city bus, buy food in supermarkets, talk to unfamiliar adults, speak more standard Mandarin and use a computer, while "self-development" was more nebulous but included, for many, gaining self-confidence and an awareness of "modern life" (*xiandai shenghuo* 现代生活). Some parents explained explicitly why these concerns were relevant for girls in particular. A Hunanese mother named Gu told me:

> "Especially for a girl, increasing [her] quality (*suzhi* 素质) is very important, especially if she looks for a job here… In our village there are no activities of this kind. There is nothing to do, only farm work. It is very backward. For a girl, it is very hard to develop one's self in the village. She will become a housewife. If she does not go out [migrate], her experiences will be very limited."

Most parents stressed that the skills daughters developed in Shenzhen were more important than the low quality of their education. However, learning such skills could also be construed as a type of education. Liu, a mother from Guangxi, expressed this directly:

[23] Wang 2008

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> "Living here is also a kind of education. There is in-school education, and outside-school education …in Shenzhen children can learn many things outside school. Parents perhaps think this is more important than education in school… If they enter the factory they will certainly be chosen over workers [who have just come] from the countryside. They will certainly be treated better. At that time, they will not be peasants…they will be city people (*chengshi ren* 城市人)".

Liu's explanation reflects two related ideas about the importance of the city, one instrumental and one more intrinsic. The instrumental concern is that the value of schooling is in skills acquired, and that more useful skills may be learnt outside formal education. The other concern is that that being a "city person" is intrinsically preferable to being a "peasant", and that a child who grows up in Shenzhen will, through the acquisition of urban habits, values and ideas, become essentially *better* than those in the village. Of course, these two concerns have considerable overlap, since part of the reason that it is better to be a "city person" is because others treat city people preferably, but there also seems to be an endorsement of the underlying value judgment about the relative worth of urbanites and peasants. This opinion may be shaped by experiences of discrimination after arrival in the city, since some parents, particularly mothers, had themselves been called derogatory names both by urbanites and less-recent migrants. Country girls (*xiangxiamei* 乡下妹), little nannies (*xiaobaomu* 小保姆) and fishing girls (*laomei* 捞妹) were common terms of abuse for migrant women in Shenzhen, while men too were labelled country bumpkins (*xiangbalao* 乡巴佬). However, judgments of peasant backwardness were also influenced by the penetration of state developmental discourses into rural China. In some cases, these had actually influenced migration decisions: the desire to experience the "modern" city was given as a motivation for migration by several parents, and even those who expressed nostalgia for their rural home described the countryside as backward.

There was a noticeable gender difference in the way that parents related these concepts to their children. In addition to Gu above, three other parents referred to their daughters' *suzhi* as needing improvement or having been improved by migration, whereas none spoke of sons' "quality". The use of the language of *suzhi* and self-development almost exclusively for daughters mirrors the official state and media depiction of rural women as occupying the

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lowest rung of the *suzhi* hierarchy, and suggests that migrants have themselves deeply internalised the idea of uncivilised "country girls".[24] Parents' apparently contradictory emphasis on the advantages of city life for their daughters can therefore be seen to stem partly from a concern with girls' "quality": the increased opportunity for girls to gain *suzhi* is an important aspect of their being in the city. As one mother expressed it:

> "For a young girl, the city is much better… I want my daughter to express herself like a city person, not an outsider. I don't want her to be a peasant. I don't want her to have the problems I have. I won't let my daughter have this inferior status (*lieshi diwei* 劣势地位)."

A second, more concrete, source of parents' views that the city is better for girls despite lower quality education relates to Liu's instrumental concern, that more useful, practical skills can be learnt in the city than in the countryside. The reason for the gender difference here was clear: a statistically significantly greater proportion of parents of girls hoped their child would settle long term in the city, where these skills would be needed, than parents of boys.[25] The previous section noted that many more boys than girls would be sent back to the village for education. The difference was even more pronounced when parents were asked where they would like their child to settle long term. 76% (34) of parents wanted their daughter to settle in the city, compared with only 56% (26) who wanted their son to do so. Few hoped their child would settle in the village, but 33% (15) did not mind where their son settled, compared with only 15% (7) for a daughter. The desire was most common in mothers of girls, of whom 25 of 28 wanted their daughter to settle in the city. In order to settle in the city as adults, daughters would need not just an abstract attainment of higher *suzhi*, but actual, practical urban life skills. Learning to take a bus, use a computer, shop for food, speak standardised Mandarin and so on would be essential for gaining urban employment and, perhaps, urban marriage.

The benefits of women's migration and the "urbanisation" of maternal aspirations

[24] For more on official depictions of the *suzhi* hierarchy, see Murphy, 2002; Anagnost, 2004; Yan, 2008.
[25] Fisher's exact test showed a statistically significant difference in which place parents thought their child should settle by child's sex (P value <0.05)

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Why did parents, particularly mothers, wish daughters to remain in the city? In addition to general reasons for children of both sexes to remain in the city (better employment prospects and better standards of living), three groups of reasons were put forward only for girls. These tell us much, not only about aspirations for daughters, but also about the advantages married women perceive themselves to have gained from migration, and their comparison of gender roles in rural and urban China.

The first was that parents felt sex discrimination was less than in rural China where many people retained "backward" attitudes. One father from rural Chongqing summed up this idea with the optimistic statement that, in Shenzhen, "girls can do anything that boys can do". This was not only a claim about comparatively more equal job prospects for young women in Shenzhen, but also about the treatment a woman could expect within her extended family. A Sichuanese mother explained that her own husband's parents held girls in low regard and it would be better for her daughter to marry into an urban family, which would not hold such attitudes:

> "Shenzhen people don't care if a child is a boy or a girl. People from our village still consider giving birth to a girl is inferior. When I gave birth to girls…my mother-in-law often showed her disappointment. I don't want my daughters to have this kind of experience".

This relates closely to the second reason, that parents thought it would be better for migrant girls to marry later, and at least to another migrant if not an urbanite. Several parents, including one father, complained about early marriage practices in their home villages, where girls could be engaged from as young as 13 years old. It was therefore widely hoped that daughters would marry away from the village. A few mothers wanted their daughters to marry urban men and gain urban *hukou*, while others were more realistic about their daughters' chances of transferring registration status, but still sought to avoid marriage to a rural husband. Many aimed for marriage to another migrant, whose worldview would be broader than that of a village man and who would not oppose his wife's future migration. One mother from Sichuan explained:

> "She and a village man would not be alike. If he hasn't also been out [migrated], hasn't seen things for himself, he won't understand her experiences. Probably he

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> wouldn't want her to go out again. In that way, she would become a village housewife and plant the fields."

That rural men are unwilling for wives to re-migrate after marriage, in part to sustain the gender division of labour as a household strategy, has been examined in Fan's work on the relegation of married women to the village.[26] While the increasing number of married women among the new-generation migrants in urban China suggests that this is changing, restrictions on future migration was still a concern to parents of girls. Interestingly, not only mothers but also two fathers I interviewed were keen to avoid this future for their daughters, suggesting perhaps some change in male attitudes as a result of migration.

These attitudes towards daughters' marriages resemble those other researchers have noted unmarried women migrants hold towards their own: *dagongmei* aim to marry urban men whose families will be more "modern" (less patriarchal) than rural in-laws, or at least other migrants, who will have less negative views of women's migration after marriage.[27] Among my interviewees, not single women but married migrants, the aim was to pass this potential benefit of migration on to daughters. Marriage thus becomes a family strategy of social and spatial mobility, enabling young women to leave poor rural areas permanently or even, perhaps, to acquire formal urban citizenship. However, some parents were aware of possible problems. Wang, a mother from Anhui, reflected:

> "City men don't want to marry rural girls - only if they are old, or have physical defects, if they can't find city wives. This kind of unstable marriage will not be good for the girl."

Like other mothers, Wang hoped that her daughter would marry a migrant and live in the city, but could again see potential disadvantages.

> "If she marries a man from a thousand miles away, she will have to stay in an unfamiliar place...for example, after having children. His family will not speak the same language. How will she communicate? She will be lonely…the customs will be different. They will have little in common. It is better to marry an Anhui man, or to stay here to have children and depend on her own family"

[26] Fan, 2003
[27] Jacka 2006:152

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This highlights another aspect of parents' wishes for their daughter to marry migrants in Shenzhen: reduced dependence on in-laws and increased closeness with the natal family. By remaining in the city, female migrants may still assume traditional gender roles as a mother and a wife but will do so much less as a daughter-in-law. A Hunanese woman, who had married a Shaanxi migrant in Shenzhen before relocating to her own village and remigrating after the birth of her children, emphasised her "little contact" with her husband's parents. Her own parents, living closer to Shenzhen, had looked after her elder daughter for two years. Several mothers described a similar pattern. In this regard, a daughter's marriage to a migrant man was regarded as having a positive effect in enhancing the importance of the wife's natal family and eroding traditional patrilineal kin relationships. This may be of particularly relevance to migrant families with only one child, who will necessarily depend on their daughter for material and emotional support in old age.

The third reason for wanting girls to settle in the city was that they could earn their own living. This was expressed only by mothers. While parents of both sexes mentioned better employment opportunities, only mothers spoke in terms of standing on one's own feet or supporting oneself (*zili* 自立). Many scholars, of both China and elsewhere, have pointed out that participation in paid labour results in increased autonomy for women after migration.[28] However, most analyses of this phenomenon in China focuses solely on young single women, many of whom cannot avoid returning to rural areas for marriage.[29] The little existing work on married women's experiences suggests they do not receive the same benefits. For example, Jacka emphasises married women's labour force disadvantage: it is difficult to find paid employment; what work is available is low status, lowly paid and largely invisible; and there is little evidence that an independent income allows them to renegotiate familial gender relations. In fact, Jacka claims that married women's position in their families might actually decline after migration, because of a higher level of domestic abuse.[30] This forms a strong contrast with the effect of migration on single women, who gain considerably from migrating.[31] However, only two of the married women Jacka interviewed in Beijing in 2001

[28] Bhachu, 1993; Ui, 1991; Pessar, 1984
[29] Fan, 2003; Murphy, 2002
[30] Jacka 2006:180-86
[31] Ngai 1999

were in independent waged employment. My interview data indicates that there may be similar effects for married women in paid labour, or at least that migrant women themselves now believe this to be the case, and that their perceptions of the advantages of migration influence their desires for an urban future for their daughters. It is therefore problematic to assume that married women do not do better as a result of migration, and I suggest there may be a more complex interplay between gender, migration and autonomy than has previously been explored.

Under the household responsibility system in rural China, farm workers' income is usually measured at household level. Women's earnings are therefore an invisible component in the household economy.[32] This was true not only in terms of men's perceptions of their former rural lives, but also that of the women themselves. Several mothers interviewed described themselves as "unemployed" before migration, but on further probing all were involved in farm work. By contrast, after migration only mothers caring for infants described themselves as unemployed. Although migrant women's wages are significantly lower than those of migrant men[33], and although many mothers complained about working conditions, overtime and pressure in their Shenzhen employment, most seemed proud of their independent income and had aspirations for their daughters to earn a wage. A Hunanese mother who worked long hours six days a week as a street tailor spoke proudly of her contribution to the family's income. Other married women, including a factory worker, a cleaner and a street vendor, expressed satisfaction that they could earn their own wage. Despite the low social status of such work, these jobs were compared positively with having "nothing to do" in the village. One mother from Chongqing, referring to her daughter, put it succinctly:

> "I don't want her to go home. Here she can do what she wants – get a job, earn money, stand on her own feet. In the village she can't do anything at all."

While some mothers, perhaps in households where there were many women to take care of household responsibilities and contribute to farming, may genuinely have been underemployed before migration, it is unlikely that many had "nothing to do". This expression, which I heard frequently, seemed to be connected more to women's sense of the

[32] Das Gupta et al., 2000
[33] Magnani and Zhu, 2012

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"worthlessness" of their rural labour, and suggests again that they had themselves internalised the idea of unpaid labour as much less valuable than waged work. However, it was not only independent wage labourers who were proud of their work after migration. Even some women who worked with their husbands running a family business emphasised their contribution to the household income in a way that none did when discussing pre-migration work.[34] One woman said specifically of their fish vending business: "I do half, he does half. We are partners". That this mother also did the majority of childcare and household tasks as well as working long hours did not seem to reduce her satisfaction in their working arrangements. However, her ambition for her daughter was to find a fixed-hours position in a firm, which would be "less pressured" than running a family business.

I suggest, then, that for married women whose labour becomes more visible, and therefore valuable, after migration, migrating means an increase in independence, perhaps leading to greater authority in household decision-making and control over family resources. In this case, it is not surprising that many wish to pass on these benefits to their daughters, by encouraging them to remain in the city rather than return to rural China. However, as the example above shows, female work force participation does not necessarily improve domestic equality. For some women, engaging in paid labour may actually increase their overall burden unless they find new alternatives to old roles, particularly those of childcare and housework. Therefore, while earning an independent wage may improve women's social status and autonomy, it may not necessarily change their relative position within the family.

Nonetheless, from the perspective of the women themselves, urban life brought significant advantages compared with the lot of married women in rural China, and almost all migrant mothers therefore expressed the desire that their daughters settle long-term in the city. Girls were therefore also better off in the short-term in the city, where they could acquire the skills they would need for their future urban lives – not necessarily those they could learn in school. Girls were also seen to be more in need of, not just practical skills, but "self-development" and "high quality" than boys, in order to become modern citizens of the city, marry a city man or at least another migrant, and earn an urban living.

[34] This seems to contradict Zhang's findings from Beijing (Zhang, 2001:118-23)

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By contrast, girls' own answers reflected far more their *current* view of life in Shenzhen, taking into account the impact on their wellbeing of loneliness, bullying and discrimination. Interestingly, though, despite their answers about where they were happier now, 85% of girls (35) hoped to settle as an adult in the city – mirroring the answers of parents as to which place was better for girls. For many children, this related to urban career aspirations: girls dreamt of becoming city teachers, doctors, policewomen or beauticians. One spoke of becoming a "career woman" (*nuqiangren* 女强人 – literally "strong woman"), while others wanted to be an artist, scientist or computer programmer. These dreams are far out of reach for most, given the educational deprivation already experienced and the restricted access for migrants to senior-high schooling in Shenzhen. Nonetheless, they demonstrate the "urbanisation" of migrant girls' aspirations. Even the two girls who expressed happiness that they would be sent home to rural China to continue their education, dreamt of working in the city when older. None aspired to rural work, and all expressed repugnance at the idea of farming.

Fangfang, a 10-year-old girl hoping to be a teacher, gave a typical answer:

> "Farming is dirty and boring, and the money is very little. Nobody wants to [do that]".

Her 15-year-old sister wanted to help me understand. She confirmed Fangfang's impression of farm work, and added:

> "If I had to live there [in the village] and live like my grandmother I would kill myself. Even death is better than that kind of life….to be a woman in the countryside is the worst [situation] of all."

Conclusion

The high female-to-male suicide rate in rural China is typically thought to be linked to the traditional subordinate relationship of wives to husbands and husbands' families, as well as the heavy burden on women who work in the fields as well as undertaking household

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labour.[35] My analysis of the hopes expressed by parents – especially mothers – for their daughters suggests that, while women's burden of work in the city may not be much decreased, their subordinate status is subtly changed, at least societally if not necessarily within each household, with the increase in participation in paid labour and the distance from husbands' parents. I have argued, against the little existing literature on the migration of married women, that these benefits extend to new-generation married migrants in paid work as well as *dagongmei.* Parents, especially mothers, reflect this in their overwhelmingly urban ambitions for daughters. Their belief that the city is best for girls now, despite poorer schools, reflects specific concerns about daughters' futures, in terms both of improving their essential "quality" and, more importantly, of equipping them with the skills necessary for future city life.

Neither of these concerns applies in the same way to migrant boys, who are not the focus of such strongly urban aspirations. Already seen as of intrinsically higher *suzhi* than rural women, men also do not benefit as greatly from the instrumental value of urban life. Although they enjoy better employment prospects and standards of living in the cities, boys do not face sex discrimination, early marriage into patriarchal households, restrictions on future migration, the denigration of the contribution of their labour and the lack of an independent income if they choose to settle in the countryside. Rural life is therefore seen by migrant parents as, and – as rural suicide rates indicate – most likely actually is, much more tolerable for Chinese men.

Girls' own assessments turn far more on their current levels of wellbeing, taking into account their concerns with schooling and other issues in Shenzhen. That girls' satisfaction with city life is lower among those who have spent longer in Shenzhen suggests that these concerns may become stronger as time passes. Interestingly, though, their longer-term aspirations are, like those of parents, strongly urban. Nonetheless, their chances of success may be limited. As the third section of this article demonstrated, migrant girls are denied the opportunity to gain a decent education which would allow them to fulfil their dreams of becoming urban doctors or teachers. As China's economic development moves towards more skilled manufacturing, even much factory work may begin to demand a level of education unavailable to migrant girls, many of whom have to drop out after junior-middle school.

[35] See for example Ji et al, 2001.

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Furthermore, continued strict conditions for *hukou* status transfer prevent migrants from becoming official urban residents, reducing the ability of rural girls to attract urban husbands. These structural and institutional factors, as well as gender discrimination within and beyond the household, make it unlikely that migrant girls will be able to build the kinds of lives they hope for in urban areas. However, if they remain in the city, in line with the urban aspirations of their parents, they may be able to achieve a better, more independent life than that available in rural China.

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